

# **The Truth-Seeker's Handbook: A Science-Based Guide**

**(2<sup>nd</sup> edition)**



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**Dr. Gleb Tsipursky**

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# ***Dedication and Acknowledgment***

*This book is dedicated to all my clients whose insights and feedback greatly improved the content of this book. Thanks for making it possible!*





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# ***Introduction***

"You can't handle the truth!"  
- *A Few Good Men* (1992)

There's a reason that this movie quote became a cultural touchstone. These words speak to a deep tension within us as individuals and within organizations as a whole. We may think we want the truth, but sometimes the facts can be difficult to handle, causing us very unpleasant emotions. Our minds tend to flinch away from these facts, preferring instead to seek out the comfort of our pre-existing beliefs.

What separates true leaders – at every level of an organization – from just those with titles is the ability to face these unpleasant facts, handle the uncomfortable emotions evoked, and take the needed steps to accomplish the organization's priorities. Being a truth-seeker involves undertaking the sometimes-difficult work of expanding one's comfort zone and challenging one's pre-existing notions for the sake of seeing the truth of reality. If you are not prepared to put some labor into this endeavor, I recommend you put this book down and turn to something better suited to your preferences. If you are, read onward!

For those who read onward, I want you to know that the effort you put into truth-seeking will be very much worth it. Even from a purely emotional perspective, a more clear view of reality will pay great dividends down the road. Sticking to pre-existing beliefs that do not align with reality causes us to develop unrealistic expectations, and we inevitably grow stressed, anxious, and depressed when our bubble is popped by the sharp needle of reality. So while it might not be pleasant to face the facts in the moment, in the long run you will be much better off in getting to the unpleasant realizations quickly, updating your beliefs to match the facts, and aligning your emotions to a more accurate understanding of reality.

Of course, the emotional payoff is just one part of the benefit you gain in orienting toward inconvenient truths instead of comfortable falsehoods. Perhaps an even bigger benefit comes from avoiding bad decisions.

Everything in our lives, personal and professional, results from our decisions. Making good decisions depends on us having the right information. Did you ever hear the acronym GIGO? That stands for “garbage in, garbage out” and stems from the field of information technology in reference to computers producing the wrong output if they get fed bad information. Our brains are in essence

organic computers that make decisions based on the information they get. If we feed them bad information based on us holding false beliefs, we will make bad decisions, in our private and professional lives.

These bad decisions are costly. In our everyday life, bad decisions cause us to lose money, time, relationships, health, and happiness. Making bad decisions in the workplace results in our organizations losing money, time, and reputation, as well as undermining teamwork and employee morale.

Now, you may not want to hold false beliefs and suffer the consequent unrealistic expectations or bad decisions. However, avoiding false beliefs is not easy. Research shows that false beliefs and their consequences come from faulty wiring in our brains that causes flawed thinking, feeling, and behavior patterns: what the scientific literature calls cognitive biases.

When I began to learn about this field while pursuing my doctoral degree, what surprised me most was that much of our bad decision-making comes from failing to understand the role of emotions in making decisions. I thought of myself as a relatively unemotional person, one who lets his

cold analysis determine his behavior. Boy, was I wrong!

Fortunately, recent scholarship shows we can address these problems by using debiasing strategies discovered by scholars in behavioral science fields to address these cognitive biases. Unfortunately, much of this research is trapped in dry academic papers in journals read only by other academics.

To me, this situation is intolerable. It is appalling to see these resources that can address some of the worst problems we face confined to so few. My knowledge of this situation comes from my professional experience as a scholar specializing in truth-seeking, rational thinking, and wise decision-making in business and other spheres. I researched these topics as a professor at The Ohio State University, specializing in the history of behavioral science.

While pursuing my scholarly career, I began to speak about decision-making and emotional and social intelligence outside of academia. My keynotes and seminars drew widespread acclaim and top marks from audiences, leading to speaking engagements at prominent associations and companies. Forward-looking leaders soon began to hire me as a consultant and executive coach before launching

major new projects, to improve current processes and team culture, and to avoid future catastrophes. You can learn more about my work in that sphere on my website, [GlebTsipursky.com](http://GlebTsipursky.com).

My ability to communicate research-based strategies clearly and eloquently, and adapt them to business realities, resulted in my work being featured in over 400 articles in a variety of venues, such as *Inc. Magazine*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Scientific American*, *Psychology Today*, *The Conversation*, *Salon*, *Business Insider*, *Government Executive*, *Lead Change Group*, *New York Daily News*, *The Plain Dealer*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *Sun-Sentinel*, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, *Buffalo News*, *Inside Higher Ed*, *The Huffington Post*, and *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. I appeared in over 350 guest interviews, including US televised appearances on CBS News and internationally on the Australian Broadcasting Network; US and international radio appearances, including on NPR, WBAI, KGO, 700WLW, KRLD, AM980, KCRW, KSKQ, KXNT, KTRS, WMNF, WSNY, WCOL, and Sunny 95; and a wide variety of podcasts and videocasts.

I wrote several books, and two became #1 Amazon bestsellers, *Find Your Purpose Using Science* and *The Truth-Seeker's Handbook: A Science-Based Guide*. You are currently holding the revised, second edition of the latter book, which includes more resources on

effective decision-making, based on the requests of my clients who read the first one.

Passionate about helping organizations and leaders avoid disaster, I also use my expertise to advance global flourishing through civic activities. To that end, I co-founded the nonprofit Intentional Insights in 2014 to create content promoting truth-seeking, rational thinking, and wise decision-making for a broad audience. I donate my time and my money – including over half the proceeds of this book – to Intentional Insights.

If you wish to join me as a fellow truth-seeker, you can take advantage of the research-based strategies described in this book to address the cognitive biases present in all of us. We need to avoid trusting our gut reactions and recognize when our intuitions steer us awry. While we all are impacted by such problematic mental patterns to some degree, studies show that each of us has our own peculiar mix, and it is up to you to learn your own vulnerabilities and how to address them. Likewise, you can learn and integrate strategies for addressing these cognitive biases into your organizations.

For instance, I suffer from optimism bias, the belief that everything will go well. As a result, if I just go with my intuitions, I will take excessive risks, not



prepare for potential problems, and run into many bad situations when interacting with others due to assuming the best of people, which is unfortunately not a safe assumption. This failure mode resulted in a systematic pattern both of unmet expectations and bad decisions that has seriously harmed my quality of life in the past. Only by using the debiasing strategies discussed in this book have I been able to address this debilitating problem.

My wife, on the other hand, suffers from pessimism bias, the belief that everything will go poorly. If I think the grass is always green on the other side, she thinks the grass is always yellow on the other side; if I see light at the end of the tunnel, she worries that it is an oncoming train. Her problem can be as bad in its own way as my problem.

As you can imagine, due to this difference, our conversations can sometimes grow heated. This is especially so since she is my business partner. However, knowing the debiasing strategies has helped us turn this source of conflict into an opportunity to help correct for each other's biased perspectives. Indeed, together we are better than the sum of our parts, as we can maximize taking advantage of opportunities with my optimism and addressing potential problems with her pessimism for the benefits of our business.

The external perspective we provide to each other is one of the many strategies that can be used to deal with the false beliefs caused by cognitive biases. While research on a variety of mental states such as happiness suggests that about half of our mental patterns are determined by our genes, the other half is determined by our environment and experience. The large majority of the population let their thought, feeling, and behavior patterns drift on the waves of life experience, buffeted by the storms of dramatic events and floating calmly in more quiet times.

Yet as a truth-seeker, you can choose to take control of your environment and life experience to develop the kind of thought, feeling, and behavior patterns that would most align with an accurate view of reality. By doing so, you can improve your decision-making in your private and professional life, and avoid the kind of emotional turmoil that comes with suddenly realizing you've been leading a life with blinders on for the last decade.

In fact, research shows that just a single training intervention can substantially improve one's ability to see reality clearly and avoid bad decisions. According to research on this topic, this ability – called rationality – is just as important as intelligence. However, while it is very difficult to improve one's intelligence level, it is quite simple to

improve one's rationality. This book has the pragmatic tools to help you improve your rationality by discarding false beliefs and developing a more clear vision of reality, as well as integrate these strategies into your organization.

The book is organized into three sections. The first outlines truth-seeking strategies pursued primarily for the sake of avoiding false beliefs within yourself. The second deals with truth-seeking in relation to other people. Finally, the third describes two strategies for individuals, teams, and organizations to see the truth and thus make better decisions.

So read onward, fellow truth-seeker, and I look forward to hearing any feedback you may have. You can email me at [gleb@intentionalinsights.org](mailto:gleb@intentionalinsights.org).



## ***Section 1:***

# ***Individual Truth- Seeking***



# **Chapter 1:**

## **What True Leaders Know About Emotional Intelligence**

True leaders at any level of the totem pole show their leadership primarily through managing their own emotions. After all, the only things we can control in life are our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and if we can manage those, we can lead our organizations from anywhere in the hierarchy. Leaders gain such emotional intelligence in large part by learning about the science-based patterns about how our emotions work and how to manage them.

If we know about how our minds work, we can be intentional about influencing our own thinking and feeling patterns. We can evaluate reality more clearly, make better decisions, and improve our ability to achieve goals, thus gaining greater agency, the quality of living intentionally.

Ok, then how do our minds work? Intuitively, our mind feels like a cohesive whole. We perceive ourselves as intentional and rational thinkers. Yet cognitive science research shows that in reality, the intentional part of our mind is like a little rider on top of a huge elephant of emotions and intuitions.

Roughly speaking, we have two thinking systems. Daniel Kahneman, who won the Nobel Prize for his research on behavioral economics, calls them System 1 and 2, but I think “autopilot system” and “intentional system” describe these systems more clearly. The term “intentional system” in particular is useful as a way of thinking about living intentionally and thereby gaining greater agency.

**The autopilot system** corresponds to our emotions and intuitions. Its cognitive processes take place mainly in the amygdala and other parts of the brain that developed early in our evolution. This system guides our daily habits, helps us make snap decisions, and reacts instantly to dangerous life-and-death situations, like saber-toothed tigers, through the freeze, fight, or flight stress response. While helping our survival in the past, the fight-or-flight response is not a great fit for modern life. We



have many small stresses that are not life-threatening, but the autopilot system treats them as tigers, producing an unnecessarily stressful everyday life experience that undermines our mental and physical well-being. Moreover, while the snap judgments resulting from intuitions and emotions usually feel “true” because they are fast and powerful, they sometimes lead us wrong, in systematic and predictable ways.

**The intentional system** reflects our rational thinking, and centers around the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that evolved more recently. According to recent research, it developed as humans started to live within larger social groups. This thinking system helps us handle more complex mental activities, such as managing individual and group relationships, logical reasoning, probabilistic thinking, and learning new information and patterns of thinking and behavior. While the automatic system requires no conscious effort to function, the intentional system takes deliberate effort to turn on and is mentally tiring. Fortunately, with enough motivation and appropriate training, the intentional system can turn on in situations where

the autopilot system is prone to make errors, especially costly ones.

Here's a quick comparison of the two systems:

| Autopilot System  | Intentional System   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fast, intuitive, emotional self</li><li>• Requires no effort</li><li>• Automatic thinking, feeling, and behavior habits</li><li>• Mostly makes good decisions, 80% of time</li><li>• However, prone to some predictable and systematic errors</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Conscious, reasoning, mindful self</li><li>• Takes intentional effort to turn on + drains mental energy</li><li>• Used mainly when we learn new information, and use reason and logic</li><li>• Can be trained to turn on when it detects Autopilot System may be making error</li></ul> |

The autopilot system is like an elephant. It's by far the more powerful and predominant of the two systems. Our emotions can often overwhelm our rational thinking. Moreover, our intuitions and habits determine the large majority of our life, which we spend in autopilot mode. And that's not a bad thing at all – it would be mentally exhausting to think intentionally about our every action and decision.

The intentional system is like the elephant rider. It can guide the elephant deliberately to go in a direction that matches our actual goals. Certainly, the elephant part of the brain is huge and unwieldy, slow to turn and change, and stampedes at threats. But we can train the elephant. Your rider can be an elephant whisperer. Over time, you can use the intentional system to change your automatic thinking, feeling, and behavior patterns, and become a better agent in achieving your goals.

I hope this information fills you with optimism. It does me. This is what Intentional Insights is all about – learning how to be intentional about using your rider to guide your elephant.

### **Questions to Consider**

- What steps do you think you can take to evaluate where your emotions and intuitions may lead you to make mistakes?
- What can you do to be prepared to deal with these situations in the moment?
- What can you do to be an elephant whisperer and retrain your elephant to have thinking, feeling, and behavior patterns that match your long-term goals?

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## **Chapter 2:**

# **Where Do Our Mental Maps Lead Us Astray?**

So imagine you are driving on autopilot, as we all do much of the time. Suddenly the car in front of you cuts you off quite unexpectedly. You slam your brakes and feel scared and indignant. Maybe you flash your lights or honk your horn at the other car. What's your gut feeling about the other driver? I know my first reaction is that the driver is rude and obnoxious.

Now imagine a different situation. You're driving on autopilot, minding your own business, and you suddenly realize you need to turn right at the next intersection. You quickly switch lanes and suddenly hear someone behind you honking their horn. You now realize that there was someone in your blind spot and you forgot to check it in the rush to switch lanes. So you cut them off pretty badly. Do you feel that you are a rude driver? The vast majority of us do not. After all, we did not deliberately cut that car

off, we just failed to see the driver. Or let's imagine another situation: say your friend hurt herself and you are rushing her to the emergency room. You are driving aggressively, cutting in front of others. Are you a rude driver? Not generally. You're merely doing the right thing for the situation.

So why do we give ourselves a pass, while attributing an obnoxious status to others? Why does our gut always make us out to be the good guys, and other people bad guys? Clearly, there is a disconnect between our gut reaction and reality here. It turns out that this pattern is not a coincidence. Basically, our immediate gut reaction attributes the behavior of others to their personality and not to the situation in which the behavior occurs. The scientific name for this type of error in thinking and feeling is called the fundamental attribution error, also called the correspondence bias. So if we see someone behaving rudely, we immediately and intuitively feel that this person IS rude. We don't automatically stop to consider whether an unusual situation may cause someone to act this way. With the driver example, maybe the person who cut you off did not see you. Or maybe they were driving their friend to the emergency room. But that's not what our automatic

reaction tells us. On the other hand, we attribute our own behavior to the situation, and not our personality. Much of the time, we feel like we have valid explanations for our actions.

Learning about the fundamental attribution error helped me quite a bit. I became less judgmental about others. I realized that the people around me were not nearly as bad as my gut feelings immediately and intuitively assumed. This decreased my stress levels, and I gained more peace and calm. Moreover, I realized that my intuitive self-evaluation is excessively positive and that in reality I am not quite the good guy as my gut reaction tells me. Additionally, I realized that those around me who are unaware of this thinking and feeling error, are more judgmental of me than my intuition suggested. So I am striving to be more mindful and thoughtful about the impression I make on others.

The fundamental attribution error is one of many feeling patterns. It is certainly very helpful to learn about all of these errors, but it's hard to focus on avoiding all of them in our daily life. A more effective strategy for evaluating reality more intentionally to have more clarity and thus gain greater agency is known as "map and territory." This

strategy involves recognizing the difference between the mental map of the world that we have in our heads and the reality of the actual world as it exists – the territory.

For myself, internalizing this concept has not been easy. It's been painful to realize that my understanding of the world is by definition never perfect, as my map will never match the territory. At the same time, this realization was strangely freeing. It made me recognize that no one is perfect, and that I do not have to strive for perfection in my view of the world. Instead, what would most benefit me is to try to refine my map to make it more accurate. This more intentional approach made me more willing to admit to myself that though I intuitively and emotionally feel something is right, I may be mistaken.

At the same time, the concept of map and territory makes me really optimistic, because it provides a constant opportunity to learn and improve my assessment of the situation. Others to whom I taught this concept in videotaped workshops for Intentional Insights also benefited from learning about both the fundamental attribution error and the idea of map and territory. One workshop



participant wrote in an anonymous feedback form: “with relation to the fundamental attribution error, it can give me a chance to keep a more open mind. Which will help me to relate to others more, and view a different view of the “map” in my head.”

Now, what are the strategies for most effectively learning this information, and internalizing the behaviors and mental patterns that can help you succeed? Well, educational psychology research illustrates that engaging with this information actively, personalizing it to your life, linking it to your goals, and deciding on a plan and specific next steps you will take are the best practices for this purpose.

### **Questions to Consider**

- What do you think of the concept of map and territory?
- How can it be used to address the fundamental attribution error?
- Where can the notion of map and territory help you in your life?
- What challenges might arise in applying this concept, and how can these challenges be addressed?

- What plan can you make and what specific steps can you take to internalize these strategies?

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## **Chapter 3:**

# **When Should You Go With Your Gut In Everyday Life?**

You're walking out of a restaurant with your date when you suddenly feel a strong urge to duck your head. You realize that doing so will make you look silly in front of your date, who you really like. Do you duck or not?

This is a great time to ignore the possibility of looking foolish and go with your gut. There's a good chance that your peripheral vision picked up on something aiming at your head that you didn't have time to process consciously. Maybe some kids are playing baseball nearby and the ball is heading your way, or maybe a pine cone is falling from the tree just outside the restaurant.

The bigger point is that you should generally trust your gut in situations where you're in physical

danger. Even if the object is not going to hit your head, you don't want to take that chance with the most important part of your body. The same goes for when you're crossing the street and have a sudden urge to leap away.

Why should you trust your gut in such situations? This quick, automatic reaction of the body results from the Autopilot System of thinking, also known as System 1, which is one of the two systems of thinking in our brain. It makes good decisions about 70-80% of the time, but commits certain systematic errors, which scholars call cognitive biases. This Autopilot System is great for protecting you from physical danger, as evolution optimized this part of the brain to ensure your survival, so your default reaction should be to trust it.

There are some rare occasions in which it goes awry even when dealing with physical danger. For example, you shouldn't slam on your brakes when you're skidding on the road, despite what your intuitions tell you. Our instincts will not always be spot-on with physical dangers having to do with modern life. It's important to learn about these exceptions to going with your gut so you can protect

yourself from physical dangers associated with the twenty first-century life.

Also note that some psychological conditions, such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, can hijack the Autopilot System and make it less reliable. In these cases, where false perceptions of danger are plentiful, simply trusting the Autopilot System is unwise.

These are the times when you need to use your Intentional System, the more rational part of your brain, to override the intuitive one. It takes effort to turn it on, but it can catch and override thinking errors committed by the Autopilot System. This way, we can address the systematic mistakes made by our brains in our everyday lives.

Keep in mind that the Autopilot System and the Intentional System are simplifications of more complex processes, and that there is debate about them in the scientific community. However, for most purposes, these simplifications are very useful in helping us manage our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Let's consider a less dangerous aspect of daily life. You're at an office store to get some supplies for your home office, and are choosing what white-out to get. You rarely use it and have no favorite brand, so the choices seem overwhelming. How much time and energy does it make sense to invest in this decision?

Go with your gut on this one. Since you use white-out rarely, it's not a good idea to invest time and effort into evaluating all the choices available and coming up with the best one. Just make a reasonable decision that satisfies your needs and get all the other stuff you want as well. This approach applies to all situations where you're making one-time decisions about minor matters. You'll waste a lot of time and cognitive resources optimizing rather than satisficing - making a satisfactory rather than an optimal choice.

Now, what about everyday life decisions that are not one-time but regular? For instance, say you eat cereal for breakfast every day. In that case, you definitely don't want to go with your gut and grab the first satisfactory cereal box you see.

Consider the amount of cereal you eat in a year. Say you go through a box a week. That's over 50 boxes a year! Imagine them all stacked up in a 3-stories tall pile. That's a lot of cereal. However, that's also only a year's worth. Consider how much cereal you'll eat in your lifetime. Now you're getting into skyscraper territory. Envision the nutrients you get and the amount of money it costs. Using such probabilistic thinking, this is a great area to optimize rather than satisfy.

Evaluate the factors that are important to you about cereal: taste, nutrition, cost, and anything else you can think of. Consider and rank the importance of all these elements. Then, compare all the cereals using these factors. Finally, choose one (or more if you want to vary the flavors).

Also, consider whether you can get them cheaper in bulk online than through the local grocery store, depending on the storage area in your home. For example, I eat a lot of tomato sauce and order it in bulk through Amazon, which gives me a 15% discount through their Subscribe & Save service.

The same approach applies to any life decision that you make systematically or anything which you do

regularly. If you used white-out a lot, it might be worth the time to pick the best white-out. If you do journaling daily, it's a good idea to choose a nice journal and good writing implement, even if it takes more time to select them and they are more expensive. The same goes for your office chair—you'll spend a lot more money and time in the long-run addressing back problems than if you spend some upfront choosing a good chair! This strategy of decision-making, called multiple-attribute utility theory, applies to any instance where it's worthwhile for you to take the time to make a reasoned decision where you weigh multiple attributes.

However, don't spend too much time trying to get information beyond the minimal amount needed to make a good decision. Some people fall into this trap when first learning about this technique, a thinking error called information bias—trying to get information beyond that necessary to make a decision. In general, balance the need to get appropriate information with that of making a timely decision to escape the trap of “analysis paralysis.”

The broader principle here is that we are not evolutionarily adapted for a situation where we can



make systematic, long-term choices about what to get. Our Autopilot System is optimized for short-term survival. It makes good decisions most of the time, and it's great for "goon enough," one-time, everyday life decisions on minor matters.

However, for anything that is a systematic, repeating choice or something you work with regularly such as an office chair or a pen, it will sometimes steer you in the wrong direction. In those cases, it's wise to invest the time, cognitive resources, and money in using a more intentional approach to make the best decision for your long-term happiness and success.

### **Questions to Consider:**

- Where in your everyday life would you benefit from going with your gut more often?
- Where in your everyday life would you benefit from using more Intentional System thinking?
- What specific changes will you make after reading this piece?

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## **Chapter 4:**

# **When Should You Go With Your Gut In Professional Interactions?**

Let's say you're interviewing a new applicant for a job and you feel something is off. You can't quite put your finger on it, but you're a bit uncomfortable with this person. She says all the right things, her resume is great, she'd be a perfect hire for this job – except your gut tells you otherwise.

### **Should You Go with Your Gut?**

In such situations, your default reaction should be to be suspicious of your gut. Research shows that job candidate interviews are actually poor indicators of future job performance.

Unfortunately, most employers tend to trust their guts over their heads and give jobs to people they

like and perceive as part of their ingroup, rather than simply the most qualified applicant. In other situations, however, it actually does make sense to rely on gut instinct to make a decision.

Yet research on decision-making shows that most business leaders don't know when to rely on their gut and when not to. While most studies have focused on executives and managers, research shows the same problem applies to doctors, therapists and other professionals.

This is the kind of challenge I encounter when I consult with companies on how to better handle workplace relationships. Research that I and others have conducted on decision-making offers some clues on when we should – and shouldn't – listen to our guts.

## **The Gut or the Head**

The reactions of our gut are rooted in the more primitive, emotional and intuitive part of our brains that ensured survival in our ancestral environment. Tribal loyalty and immediate recognition of friend or foe were especially useful for thriving in that environment.

In modern society, however, our survival is much less at risk, and our gut is more likely to compel us to focus on the wrong information to make workplace and other decisions.

For example, is the job candidate mentioned above similar to you in race, gender, socioeconomic background? Even seemingly minor things like clothing choices, speaking style and gesturing can make a big difference in determining how you evaluate another person. According to research on nonverbal communication, we like people who mimic our tone, body movements and word choices. Our guts automatically identify those people as belonging to our tribe and being friendly to us, raising their status in our eyes.

This quick, automatic reaction of our emotions represents the autopilot system of thinking, one of the two systems of thinking in our brains. It makes good decisions most of the time but also regularly makes certain systematic thinking errors that scholars refer to as cognitive biases.

The other thinking system, known as the intentional system, is deliberate and reflective. It takes effort to turn on but it can catch and override the thinking errors committed by our autopilots. This way, we

can address the systematic mistakes made by our brains in our workplace relationships and other areas of life.

Keep in mind that the autopilot and intentional systems are only simplifications of more complex processes, and that there is debate about how they work in the scientific community. However, for everyday life, this systems-level approach is very useful in helping us manage our thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

In regard to tribal loyalty, our brains tend to fall for the thinking error known as the “halo effect,” which causes some characteristics we like and identify with to cast a positive “halo” on the rest of the person, and its opposite the “horns effect,” in which one or two negative traits change how we view the whole. Psychologists call this “anchoring,” meaning we judge this person through the anchor of our initial impressions.

## **Overriding the Gut**

Now let's go back to our job interview example.

Say that the person went to the same college you did. You are more likely to hit it off. Yet, just because a person is similar to you does not mean she will do a good job. Likewise, just because someone is skilled at conveying friendliness does not mean she will do well at tasks that require technical skills rather than people skills.

The research is clear that our intuitions don't always serve us well in making the best decisions (and, for a business person, bringing in the most profit). Scholars call intuition a troublesome decision tool that requires adjustments to function properly. Such reliance on intuition is especially harmful to workplace diversity and paves the path to bias in hiring, including in terms of race, disability, gender and sex.

Despite the numerous studies showing that structured interventions are needed to overcome bias in hiring, unfortunately business leaders and HR personnel tend to over-rely on unstructured interviews and other intuitive decision-making practices. Due to the autopilot system's overconfidence bias, a tendency to evaluate our decision-making abilities as better than they are, leaders often go with their guts on hires and other

business decisions rather than use analytical decision-making tools that have demonstrably better outcomes.

A good fix is to use your intentional system to override your tribal sensibilities to make a more rational, less biased choice that will more likely result in the best hire. You could note ways in which the applicant is different from you – and give them “positive points” for it – or create structured interviews with a set of standardized questions asked in the same order to every applicant.

So if your goal is to make the best decisions, avoid such emotional reasoning, a mental process in which you conclude that what you feel is true, regardless of the actual reality.

### **When Your Gut May Be Right**

Let's take a different situation. Say you've known someone in your work for many years, collaborated with her on a wide variety of projects and have an established relationship. You already have certain stable feelings about that person, so you have a good baseline.



Imagine yourself having a conversation with her about a potential collaboration. For some reason, you feel less comfortable than usual. It's not you – you're in a good mood, well-rested, feeling fine. You're not sure why you're not feeling good about the interaction since there's nothing obviously wrong. What's going on?

Most likely, your intuitions are picking up subtle cues about something being off. Perhaps that person is squinting and not looking you in the eye or smiling less than usual. Our guts are good at picking up such signals, as they are fine-tuned to pick up signs of being excluded from the tribe.

Maybe it's nothing. Maybe that person is having a bad day or didn't get enough sleep the night before. However, that person may also be trying to pull the wool over your eyes. When people lie, they behave in ways that are similar to other indicators of discomfort, anxiety and rejection, and it's really hard to tell what's causing these signals.

Overall, this is a good time to take your gut reaction into account and be more suspicious than usual.

The gut is vital in our decision-making to help us notice when something might be amiss. Yet in most situations when we face significant decisions about workplace relationships, we need to trust our head more than our gut in order to make the best decisions.

### **Questions to Consider:**

- Where in your professional life would you benefit from going with your gut more often?
- Where in your professional life would you benefit from using more Intentional System thinking?
- What specific changes will you make after reading this piece?

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